

Autistic “Eloping” and Other Fugitive Practices: Reflections on Neuroqueer Resistance

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AFFILIATED WITH THE UNIVERSITY OF WATERLOO



Greetings from Turtle Island/ Canada

- In many settings in Turtle Island/ North America/ Canada we start by acknowledging the land that we are on and the first peoples of that land. This also highlights the ongoing and unresolved impact of colonialism.
- I work at Renison University College, affiliated with the University of Waterloo. I am a settler of European ancestry whose parents immigrated to what is now known as Canada.
- The University acknowledges that we are on the traditional territories of the Anishnaabeg, the Haudenosaunee, and the Neutral or Attawandaron peoples. We are grateful for the knowledge and care that these communities hold and share.

More context

- The University of Waterloo is situated on the Haldimand Tract, which is land that the British Crown promised to the Six Nations in 1784. Currently the Six Nations control 4.9% of the promised territory.
- One of the largest and longest-running Indian Residential Schools, the Mohawk Institute (1828-1970), is located nearby.
 - Affected over 4,600 Indigenous children, their families, and their communities





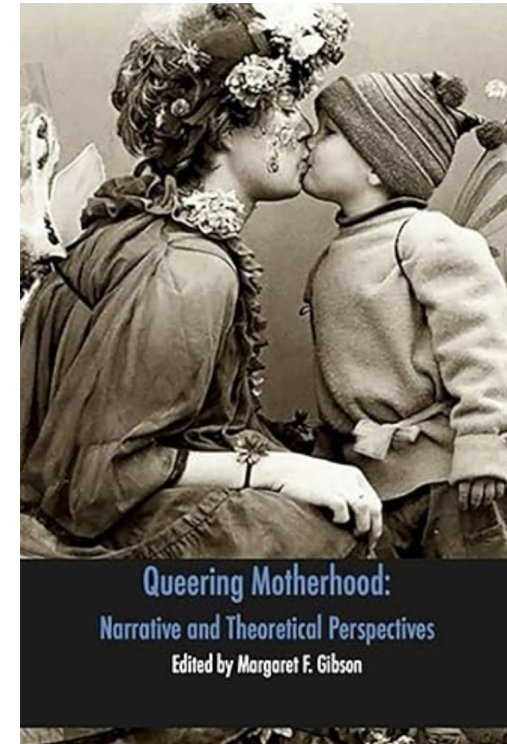
Who and where we are as educators and researchers is not neutral

I am an Associate Professor. I am also

- a social worker
- a parent to 2 young adults
- a queer woman
- a person with a chronic illness
- a non-Autistic person
- a fan of birds and jigsaw puzzles
- and many other things.

Academic things I do

- Jointly appointed to the School of Social Work and Social Development Studies
- Two primary areas:
 - 2SLGBTQ+ studies (particularly re. parents)
 - Disability studies
- Courses in queer and trans studies, disability studies, social work with families, and research



Research things I do

Weighing In : Academic Writers on Neurodiversity

PUBLISHED RESEARCH-ARTICLE

Author(s): Bridget Livingstone ^{1,*}, Margaret F. Gibson ², Patty Douglas ³, Sarah Leo ⁴, Julia Gruson-Wood ⁵

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Journal: International Journal of Disability and Social Justice

Publisher: Pluto Journals

Keywords: neurodiversity, disability, autism, discourse analysis, expertise, language, social movements

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Learning Access: an investigation into female students' experiences of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)-related accommodations in Ontario universities

What are the experiences and perceptions of gaining academic accommodations for Ontario undergraduate women with ADHD?

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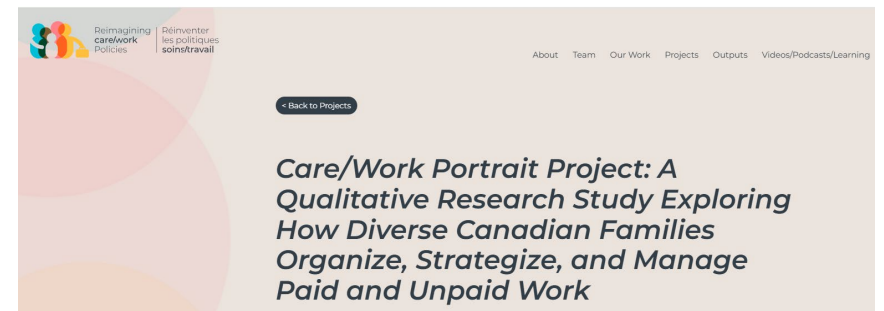
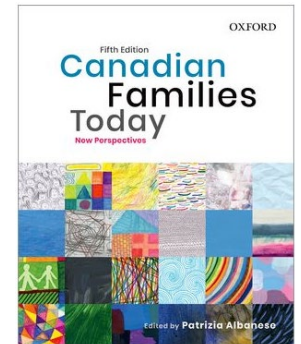
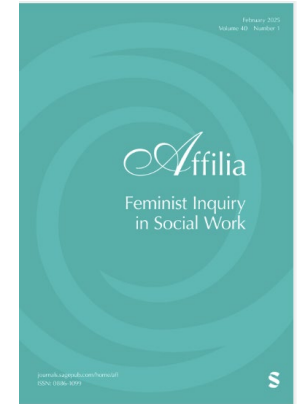
Observing Neurodiversity, Observing Methodology: Ethnography in Pandemic Times

Margaret F. Gibson, Bridget Livingstone, and Paula Crockford [View all authors and affiliations](#)

[All Articles](#) | <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069241266200>

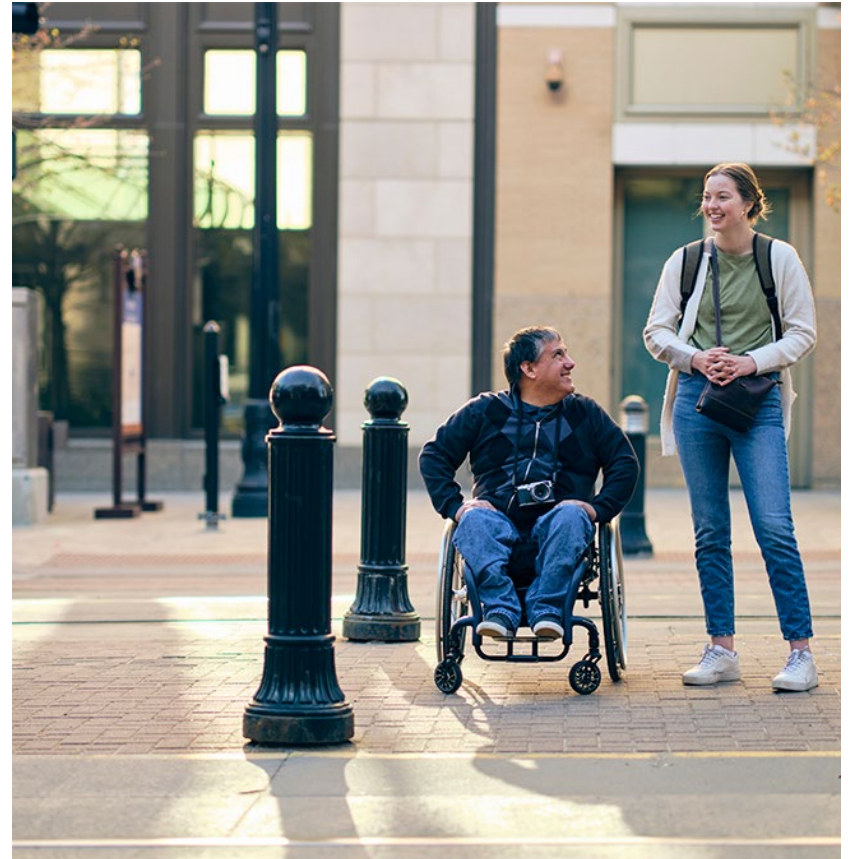
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NEURODIVERSITYMATTERS



Eloping: Autistic people's perspectives on departure and well-being

- Multi-method, participatory research project
- Proposed by a community member, Nicole Corrado, who knew my other work (The Neurodiversity Matters Project) and had done a sample survey because of her own experiences and critiques
- Funded by a SSHRC Insight Grant (federal funding) and a UW-SSHRC (federal institutional funding)
- Still ongoing!
 - Check out updates and other presentations at <https://uwaterloo.ca/scholar/m23gibso/eloping-autistic-peoples-perspectives-departure-and-well-being>



Objectives

- Learn more about why Autistic people (of all ages) leave places suddenly or in ways that concern others (and sometimes themselves)
 - This is often called “eloping” or “elopement” in professional and research settings
- Understand more about what is and is not helpful for people and systems to do – or to stop doing
- Improve how we support each other across spaces
 - Work towards public and institutional spaces that are as safe and equitable as possible
- Make research more accountable and responsive to Autistic communities

Challenges

The language of “eloping” is not widely understood and/or endorsed outside of research/ practitioner settings

This term covers a really wide range of experiences

Existing research has almost entirely excluded the perspectives of Autistic people and simply viewed this as a “problem behaviour”

Experiences of harm, violence, and threats need to be addressed

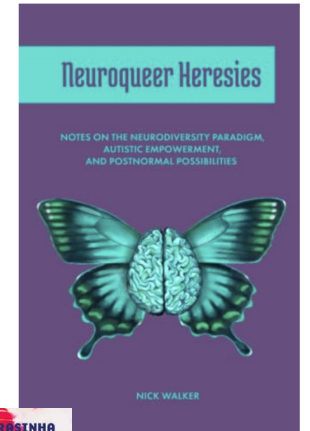
Police are sometimes called

Discussions and research have focused almost totally on children

Why “neuroqueer”?

Why “resistance”?

- Drawing on Nick Walker’s use of “neuroqueer” as a verb and an adjective. She suggests we focus on *doing* things that challenge and resist neurotypical and gendered expectations and authority structures
 - Indebted to critical autism studies, disability justice activism, neurodiversity studies, queer and trans theory...
- When Autistic people leave spaces such as schools, this action violates normative expectation and practice (pedagogical, authoritative, interpretive) making it a neuroqueer practice of embodied resistance
- Can research that starts from the priorities, knowledges, and perspectives of Autistic people also be a form of neuroqueer resistance?



melanie yergeau

AUTHORING **autism**
/ on rhetoric and neurological queerness



Empire of Normality



Neurodiversity and Capitalism
Robert Chapman

Methods

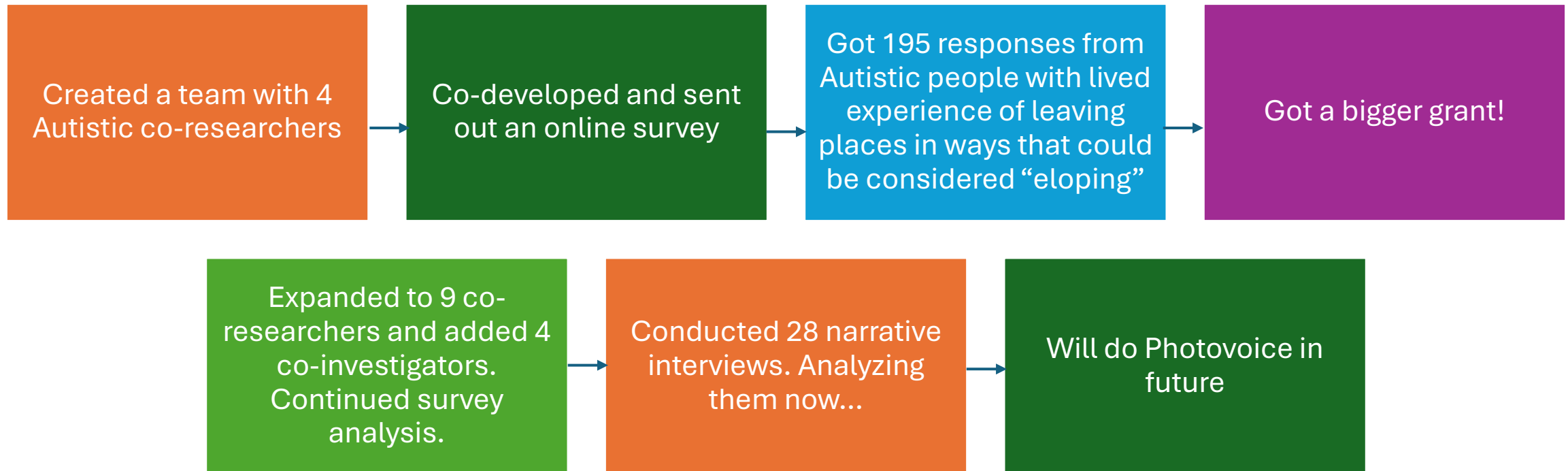
Participatory Action Research

Survey (online)

Narrative and discourse
analysis (interviews)

Photovoice (arts-based
research)

Study stages

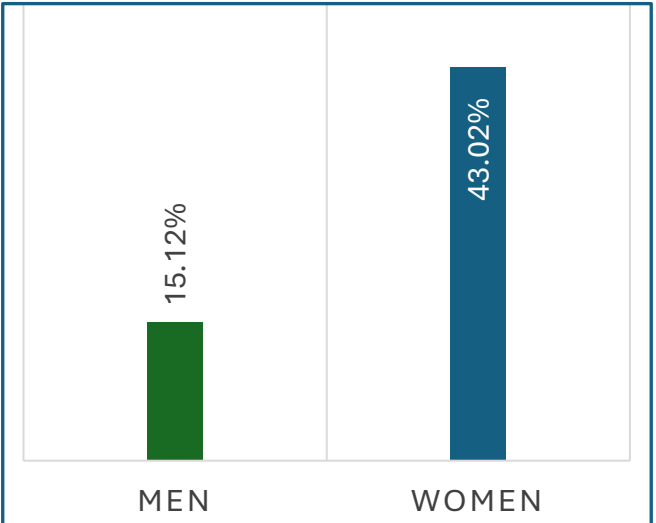
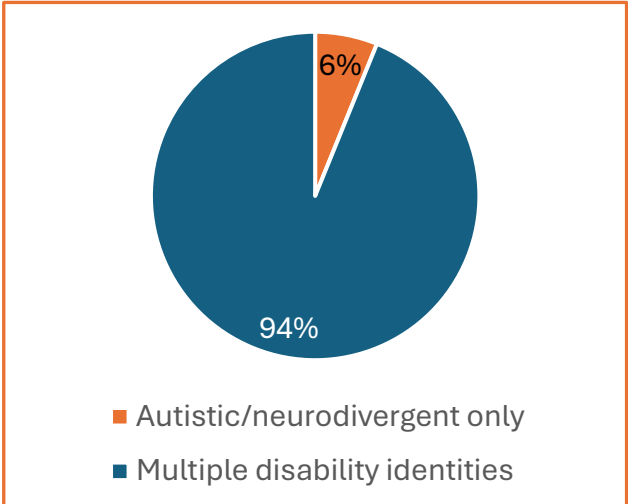
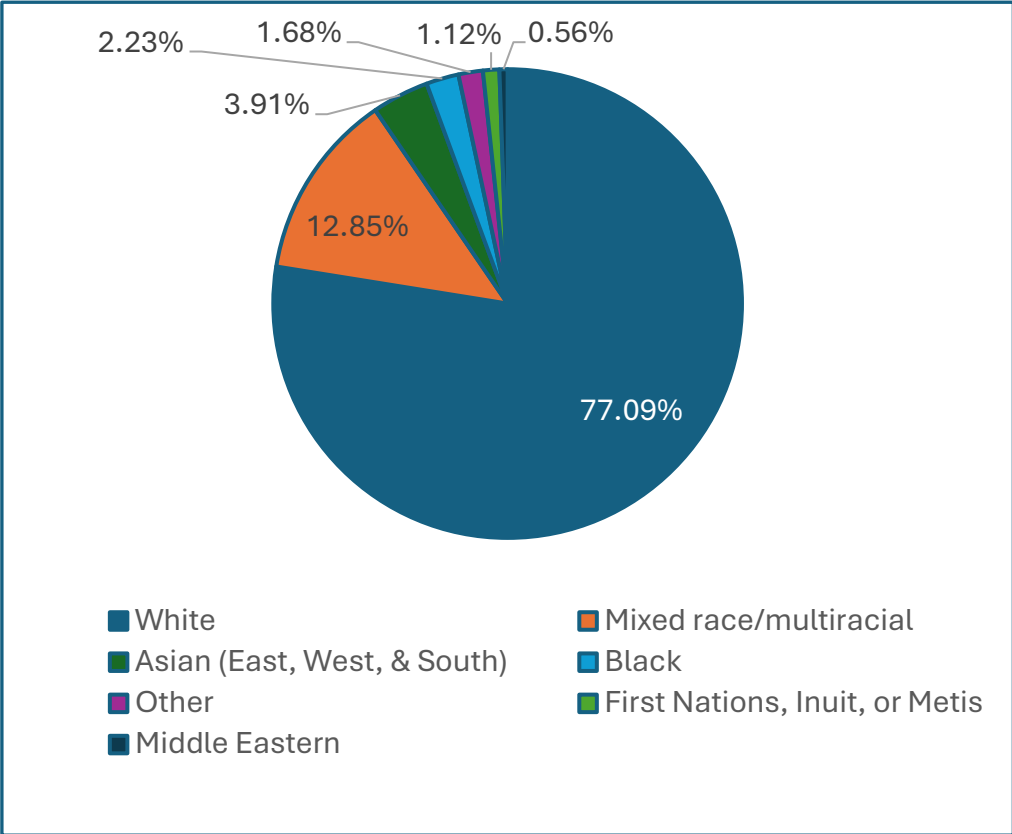
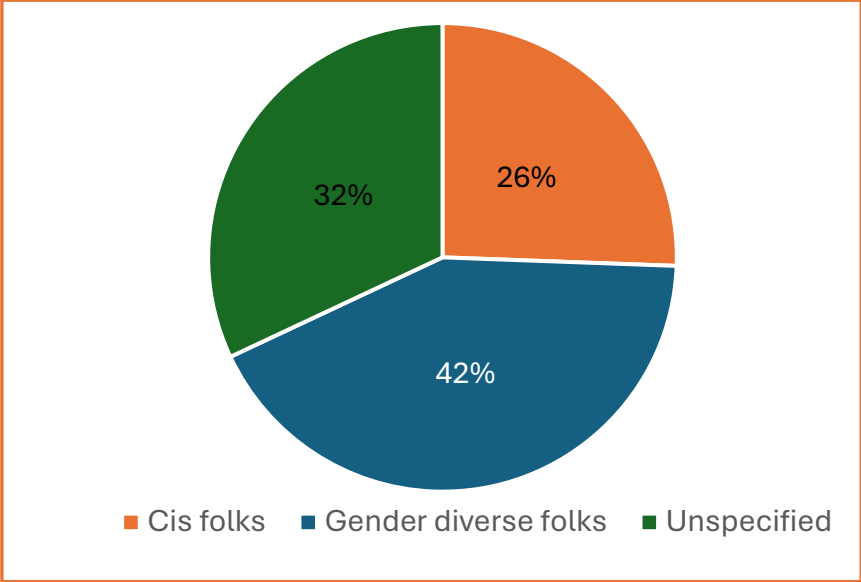
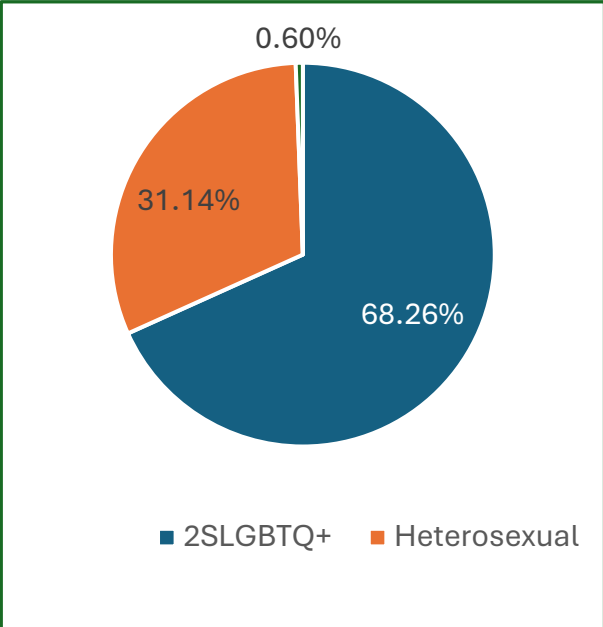


Survey

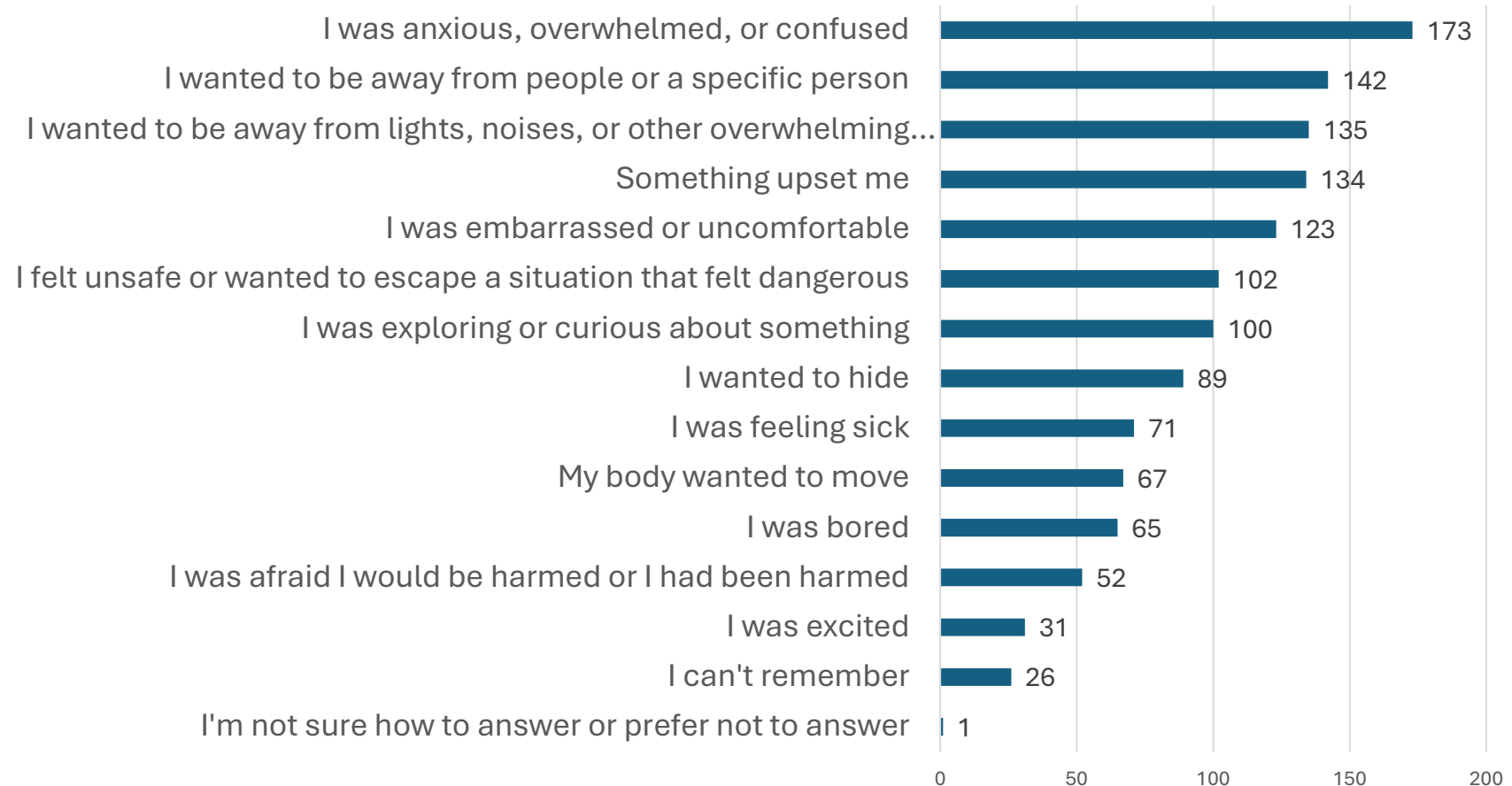
Survey

- Online survey was developed in collaboration with the co-researcher team
- Distributed via researchers' and co-researchers' social networks, social media, Autistics4Autistics (A4A) Ontario, & Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN)
- Participants had to be at least 13 years of age, identify with autism, and have experience with elopement/leaving places (broadly defined)
- Questions about reasons for eloping, impact on well-being, and others' reactions
- Completed by 195 respondents

Survey demographics



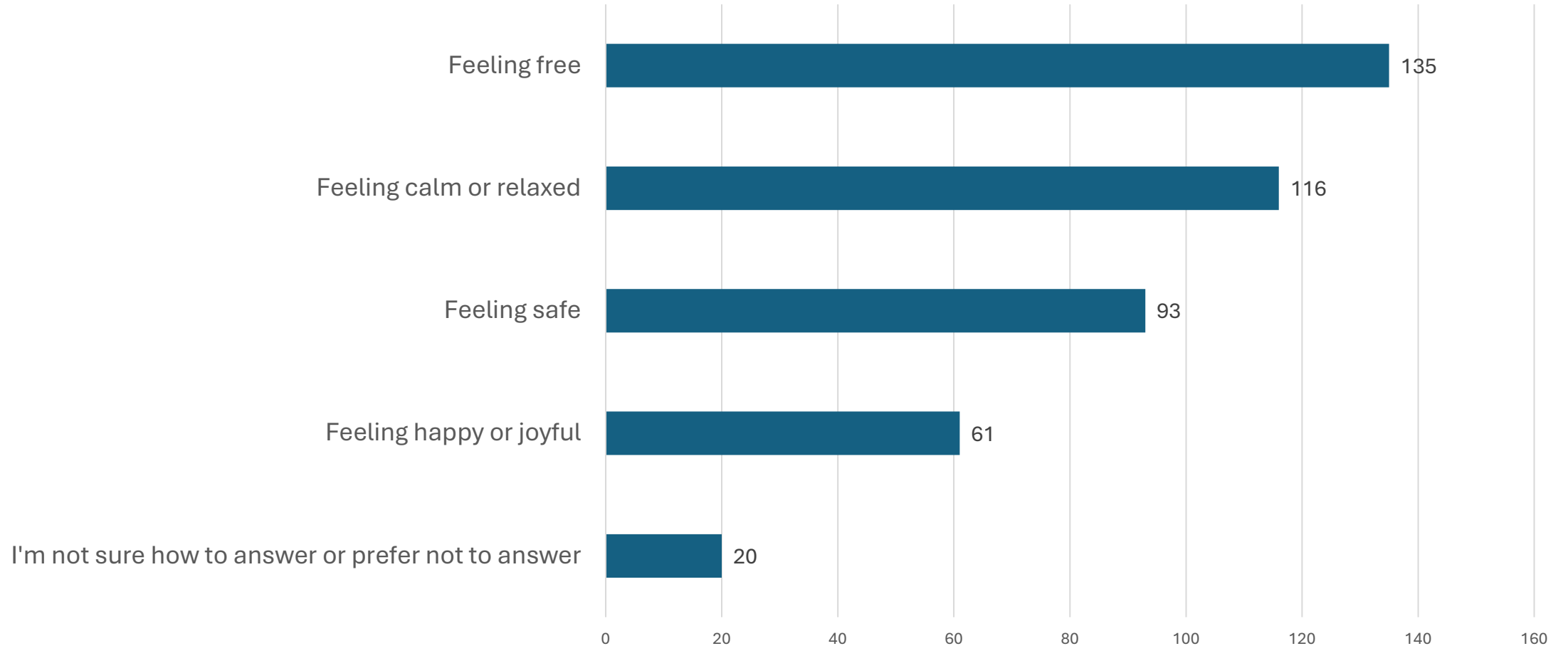
Why Do People “Elope”?



Survey: Why Do People “Elope”?

- Some respondents provided text responses that added greater depth or nuance to the presented survey options:
 - *Feeling like I’m invisible...being unheard/unsupported in times of stress...*
 - *Because I was being bullied. Because a teacher wouldn’t listen to me or help me, so I ran off.*
- Others added entirely new reasons for leaving:
 - *Defy parent*
 - *I was sent to find something and didn’t realize that I was expected to return if I couldn’t find it, rather than continue looking.*
 - *I did not know how to leave politely in a neurotypical way so I just left.*

Positive Emotions Associated With Eloping



Positive Emotions

- Some respondents provided rich text responses describing the emotional impacts of leaving places
 - *Feeling safe - but I didn't tick it above, because it's not a positive thing -- it's more just like relief?*
 - *Feeling in control of my life and decisions*
 - *I feel confident about exercising my agency*
 - *I was in control of my personhood & autonomy, & my body could “breathe”*

Negative Emotions

- “Feeling anxious or overwhelmed” (130 respondents)
- 55% indicated that “leaving usually makes me feel better” compared to only 3% who said “leaving usually makes me feel worse”
- Far from being an “irrational” problem behaviour, elopement can serve a variety of purposes and hold different meanings for people who leave places

Experiences of Violence

Violence was a relatively common factor in elopement

Parental abuse was the most commonly reported form of violence (43 respondents), followed by sexual harassment (39 respondents)

14 respondents reported excessive force by police

Responses From Others

- Parents/guardians were most commonly reported as present during elopement (80%), followed by teachers (45%), additional family members (36%), and strangers (29%)*
- Others' responses ranged from harmful to helpful: when asked to rate others' responses on a scale, **police officers and mental health practitioners were rated as the least helpful in their responses** (average score around 3), **while paramedics, strangers, and mobile crisis teams were rated most highly** (average scores around 6, 6, and 8)
- Parents and teachers had an average rating around 4 out of 10

Implications

People elope for a variety of different reasons and most feel better after leaving a place

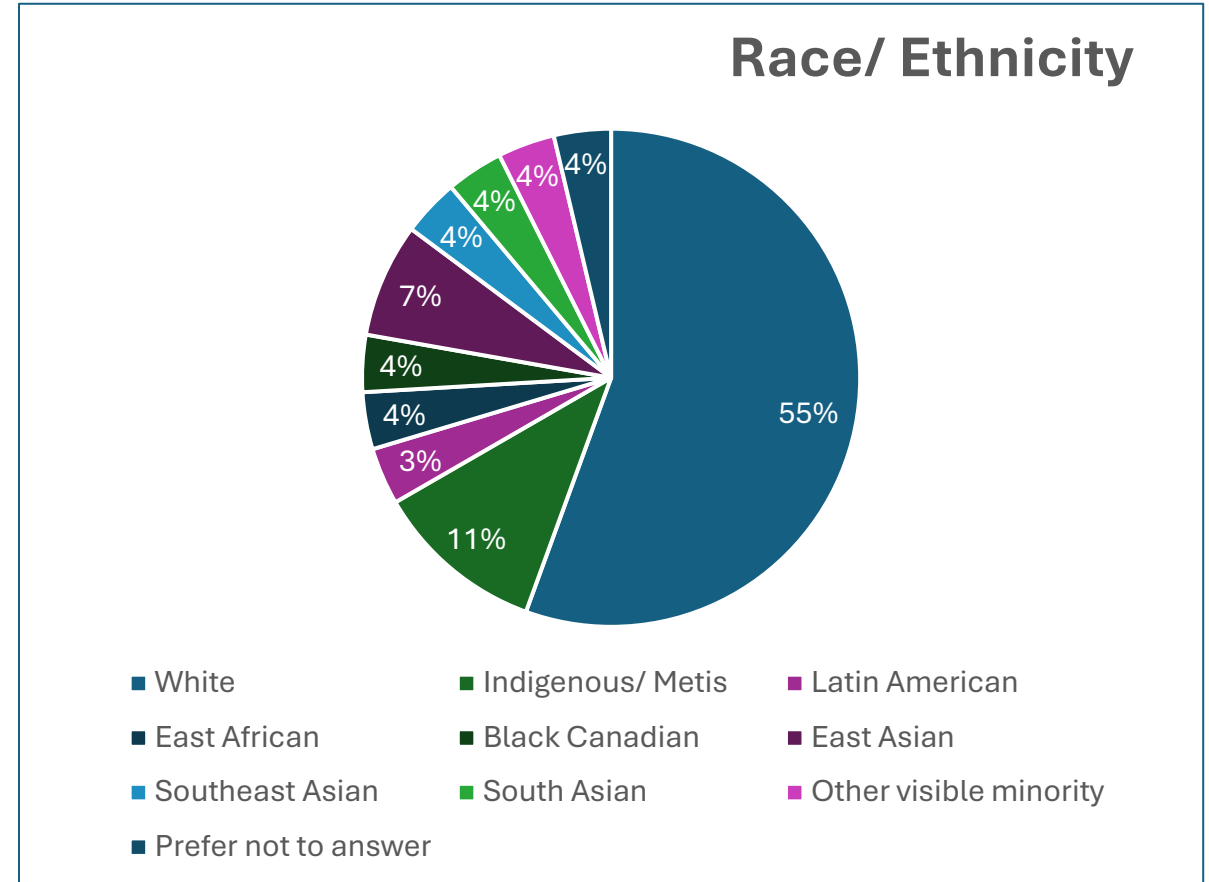
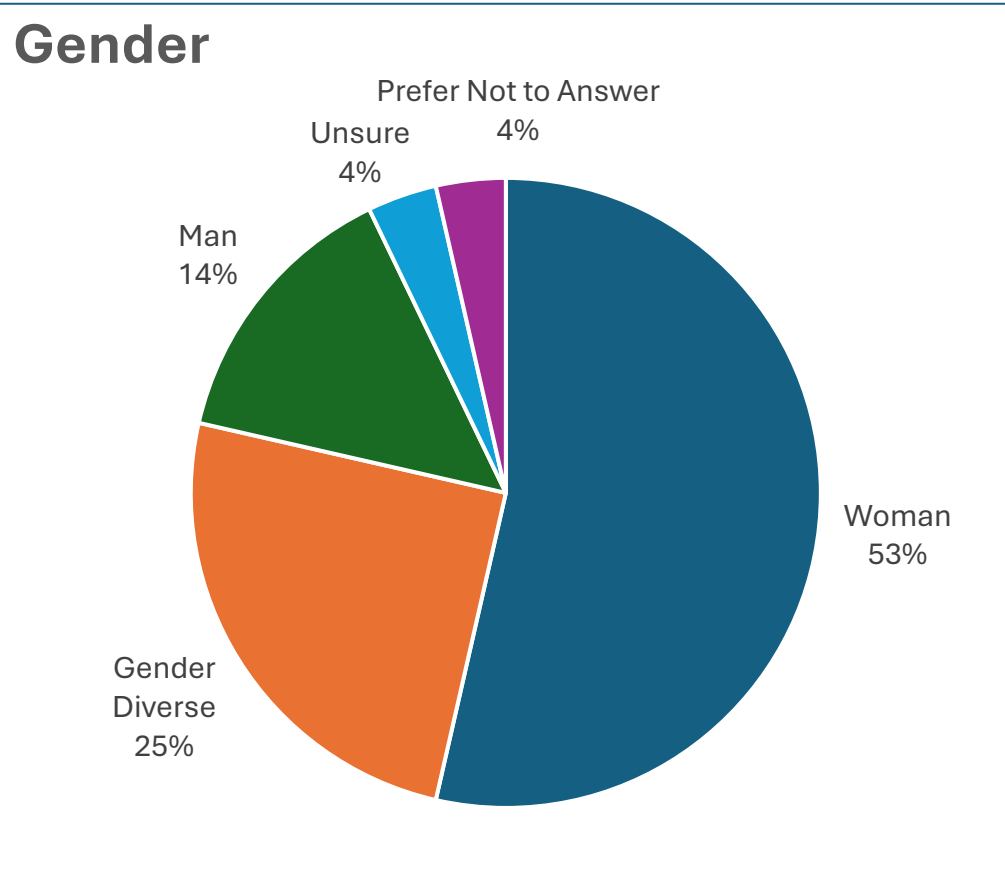
Elopement is not just a consideration for specially trained frontline workers, or Autistic people's loved ones – society as a whole should be prepared to respond to elopement in helpful ways

Interviews

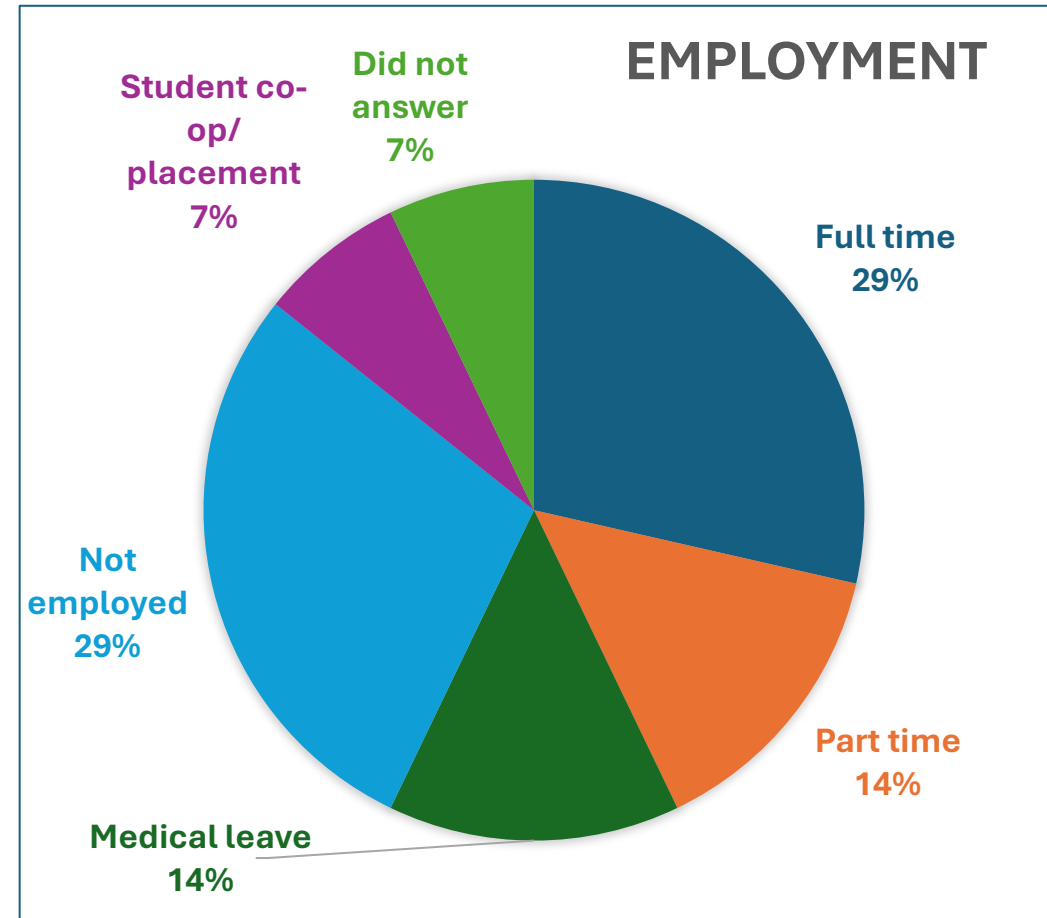
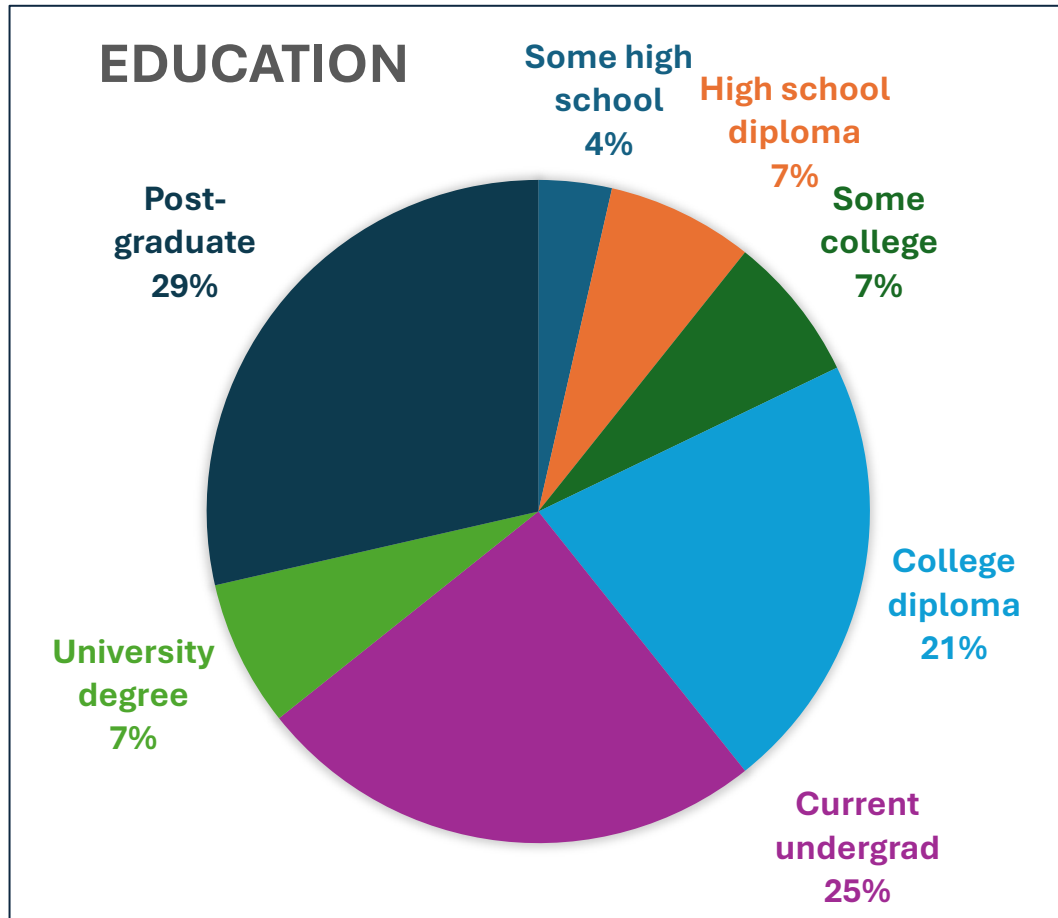
Narrative interviews

- We asked **28 people** about their experiences of “eloping” and what it meant to them. We used a semi-structured, narrative approach.
- Our 9 co-researchers were consulted on the questions and supported the recruitment process. Some were also interview participants.
- We worked to get a diverse group of participants in terms of: region, gender, age, race, kinds of experiences (e.g. childhood, adulthood, setting, etc.)

Interview participant demographics



More demographics



Emerging findings

- People are leaving places for many reasons! People often tell stories from across their lifespan.
 - Stories of wandering, getting lost, losing track of where other people are
 - Stories seeking things and places that interest or soothe
 - Stories of situations that are no longer bearable
 - Sensory overwhelm, relational conflict, not enjoying what is supposed to be “fun”
- When people are in situations where they have choices, and/or in supportive relationships, leaving can be no big deal
- When people have few options or face violence/belittling, leaving can be a very big deal

Neuroqueering social expectations

- Social situations (e.g. family events and parties) and school/ work settings can be especially tough spaces
- Being “socially appropriate” can be wielded as a relational and institutional weapon against Autistic people
 - Demand to interact with people and be “likeable”
 - Expectation of suffering in the name of “fun” and “friendship”
 - Guilt and resentment if people take care of their own needs
 - Language of “making people worry”
 - Assumption of fully available, consistent, spoken communication

Neuroqueer resistance

- Gendered expectations permeate these beliefs about when and how and who can leave
- Interview participants talked about men being “allowed” to be less social, to leave suddenly, to opt out of conversations, to only talk about things that they are interested in
- Abusive and coercive partners/ family can also exploit the idea that Autistic individuals are being “bad” or “unreasonable” and need to be returned home
 - Can use gendered, neurotypical assumptions with police and other authorities

Gender and freedom to leave

I think I sometimes notice differences with [male] partners, where they can sort of just get up and leave certain places and no one really bats an eye. I think there is more of an expectation, at least, like leaving abruptly seems worse to do based on your gender, like if you're presenting as a woman. There's a rudeness to it.

That was, I think, also just a fear of not fleeing in schools, not wanting to show disrespect to the teachers and professors, but I can think of a lot of instances where classmates would do it. I don't ever remember any of my girlfriends doing it. It was always like, yeah, I think mostly guys, and they were allowed to. Now that I think about it, it seems like they didn't need to ask for permission as much.

Danger discourse

- Interviews showed a tension between a dominant story of “danger” and lived experiences.
 - This connected with race and gender, and the idea that certain people should not be in public spaces alone
- Many people expressed concern that Autistic children and some adults might be at risk of harm when they left places, at least in some circumstances
 - E.g. concern about getting lost, busy roads
- People often emphasized that they could do things differently as adults – especially with mobile phones
- They also reported that “strangers” had sometimes been really helpful

Describing danger in eloping

That was the worst because I climbed out the window in my socks, away from the neighbors' lawnmower, punched the screen out of my bedroom... Climbed out the window in my socks, climbed down the gutter on the garage roof, wandered off, ended up in some industrial plant, again climbing under a fence. *That was dangerous.*

Where is “safe”?

- But stories of people’s experiences showed that “danger” was often found in the places that supposed to be “safe”: schools, homes, family gatherings...
- Danger discourses and fears of “strangers” prevent people from having “safer” options for leaving
 - Just hearing “don’t do it” rather than “go here” or “avoid busy roads”

**Intolerable/ unsafe environments
create a no-win situation**

Running from violence

I ran away from home once, when I was – gosh, I never even thought about that until just now. I ran away from home once when I was, I think, 12 because my dad used to hit us – my mom and my siblings and I – and I had told myself once, when I was hiding in my room, crying in shame like I used to, that the next time this happened, I would run away. So, it happened, but it happened in like January, so I stole the grocery money and I took the bus, which I had never done before, and I got to [city, province], from [city]. I had to talk to some people at the border and they kind of could tell I wasn't like a grown-up because I didn't have any identification, so they talked to me very sternly. I had to come back and it was not great.

Police and other responses to eloping

- As in the survey, some people had stories of encountering police
 - These were never “great”, but ranged from “not as bad as I expected” to terrifying
 - The white, cis, male interview participants did not have as many concerns about police
- Police encounters were one example of how other people’s ideas of what would be “safe” could produce greater harm for Autistic individuals



Police encounters

I dealt with police [before] where, I guess, people reported me on the street for observing that there's some kind of perceived dangerous behavior or that I was suffering some kind of mental health episode. Everybody stopped and they said, "Are you okay? Are you okay?" I kept putting on that masking, brave face, "I'm okay, I'm okay," but then I dealt with a whole squad of police cars...

I didn't know [this time] that somebody called them, that they reported me lost. I thought, okay, I dealt with them years ago and it was kind of Mental Health Act-related. I thought that somebody might have called them again to possibly go through that or possibly do what's called a welfare check or wellness check, something like that. But it wasn't anything related to that.

When I looked in the peek hole, I thought, okay, there's uniformed officers. What's going on here? The thing is, I thought I better open the door and I better be calm. My reaction is I better kind of like don't give them any indication that something might be wrong.

Schools

- Interviews included many stories about schools
 - For some people, the strong desire to follow rules meant that they did not leave schools, even if they were uncomfortable
 - Some people had informal arrangements where they would go to a particular place if they needed to leave the classroom and the adults were okay with this
 - Some people experienced bullying and shaming from peers and adults alike, and would flee – and then be punished for leaving
 - Some took unofficial breaks e.g. going to the lavatory and then not coming back until the end of the period

Strategies for schools

- Participants had excellent ideas on how to create safe and consensual opportunities for students to leave that didn't rely on being able to communicate verbally in an intense moment

*Like, **I don't just run aimlessly**; I will run and go to a place, so I see that a lot with kids at work. They're like, "Oh, the kid runs out of the room." I'm like, "**Okay. Where do they go?**" They're like, "**Oh, they just always go to the same spot.**" I'm like, "**Then, you don't need a strategy for that. The kid has already found the solution.**" Just let them know that they're allowed to go there and if they always just go there, you will never stop them and you will come and check and make sure they're at that spot because you have a job of checking off attendance... **they're just meeting a need and it's a safe choice and there's no problem.***

So, what do you think?

- This is still an ongoing project – so I would love to hear your thoughts and questions
 - Also see <https://uwaterloo.ca/scholar/m23gibso/eloping-autistic-peoples-perspectives-departure-and-well-being>

What is neuroqueer resistance to you? How do you think about fugitive practices in your work?

Thank you to...

- You all for inviting me and engaging in this discussion
- The co-researchers and the participants across the survey and the interviews!
- bridget livingstone, Hannah Monroe, Aimee Morrison, Tina Wilson, Trish Van Katwyk, and Edwin Ng

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